

# OLDER ADULTS & HOMELESSNESS

## ISSUE BRIEF 2025

COLORADO  
COALITION  
FOR THE HOMELESS

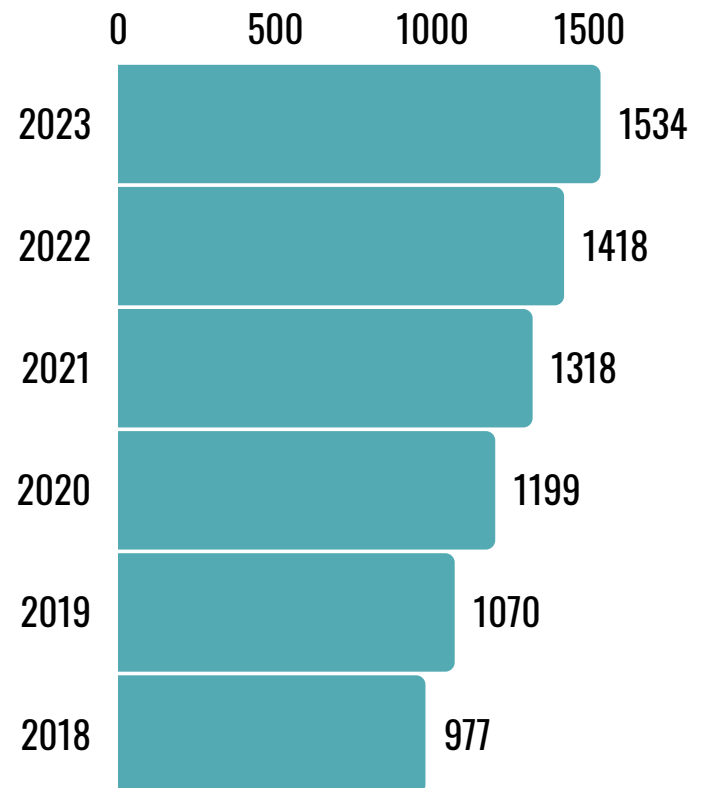


As the American population ages and housing affordability and availability continue to worsen, the intersection of aging and homelessness is becoming an increasingly urgent issue. Older adults, especially those living on fixed or diminishing incomes, are increasingly experiencing housing instability and are being squeezed and priced out by the rising costs of housing. Housing cost-burden among older adults has reached an all-time high with the most recent data from 2021 showing that 11.2 million older adults were cost-burdened, meaning they spent more than 30% of their income on housing.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, adults 65 and older are the fastest growing age group of people experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup> While older adults primarily face homelessness for the same reasons as the general population—lack of affordable housing, poverty, poor health, and limited resources—they are additionally vulnerable to age-related events like the onset of a disability or cognitive impairment, inability to work, loss of a spouse, and mobility limitations that can lead to and exacerbate homelessness. Although the term older adults implies seniors of retiring age (65+), people experiencing homelessness often have age-related conditions associated with those 10–20 years older than their housed counterparts. To account for this disparity, as well as the varying definitions used in source material, this report refers to older adults, aging adults, and seniors interchangeably as those over the age of 50. Addressing homelessness among this population requires targeted interventions that account for the unique challenges that older adults face, ensuring that they have access to housing, healthcare, and other supports.

**ADULTS 65 AND OLDER ARE THE FASTEST GROWING AGE GROUP OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.**

FIGURE 1

**At the Coalition, the number of older adults 65+ seeking healthcare has risen from 977 in 2018 to 1,534 in 2023.**



## THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Rising homelessness among aging adults is a growing and complex issue with significant economic, social, and health implications. The 2024 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, based on the 2024 Point in Time Count of homelessness on a single night in January, revealed 146,154 people experiencing homelessness over the age of 55 (Figure 2). One in five people experiencing homelessness are now 55 or older. Nearly half (46%) of those over 55 were experiencing unsheltered homelessness.<sup>3</sup> Although this was only the second year that AHAR reported data disaggregated by age, other metrics show that the number of older adults experiencing homelessness has increased over time.

**FIGURE 2**

	<b>Sheltered</b>	<b>Unsheltered</b>	<b>Total</b>
55-64	54,989	49,018	104,007
Over 64	24,323	17,824	42,147
Over 55	79,312	66,842	146,154
Total- all people experiencing homelessness	497,256	274,224	771,480

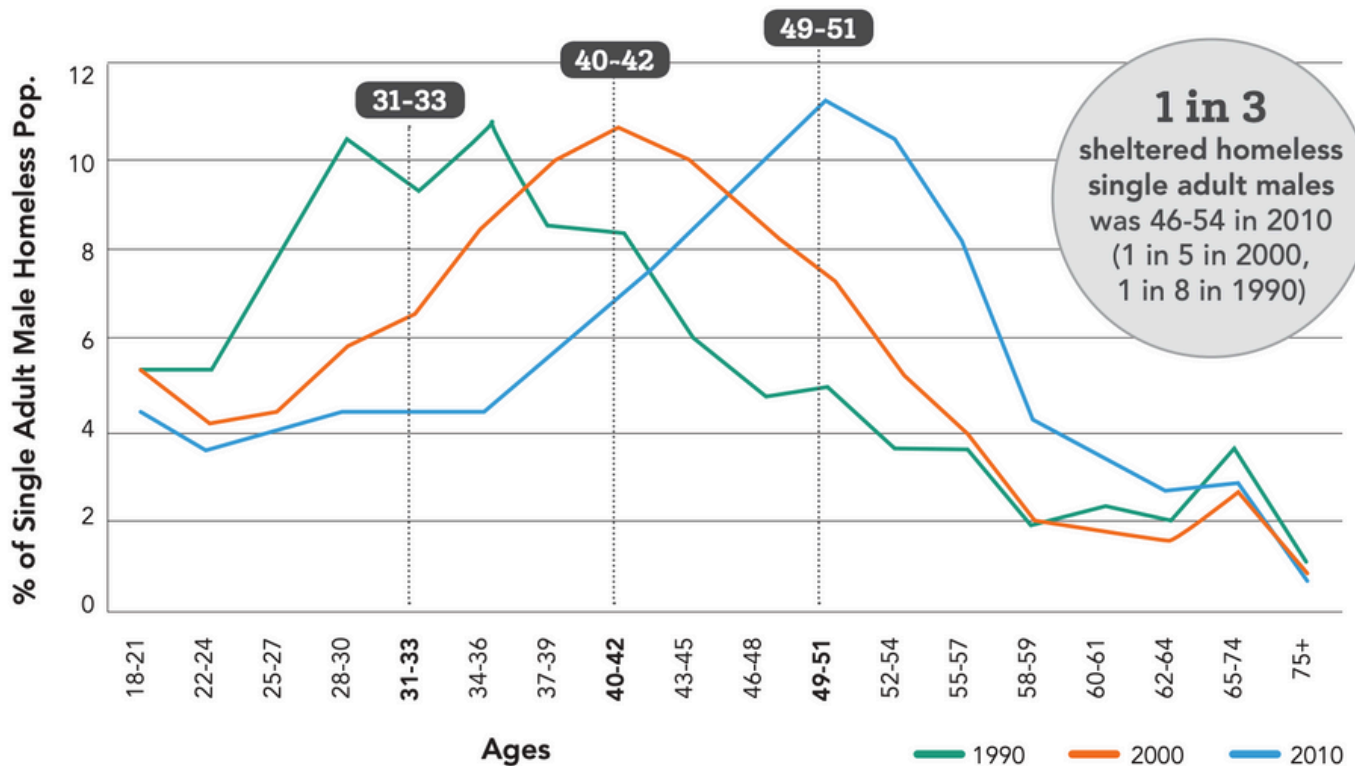
Among unhoused single adults, the percentage older than 50 increased from 11% in the early 1990s to 37% in 2003 and approximately 50% in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this trend is not expected to slow. One study from the University of Pennsylvania used data from Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles to model the trajectory of senior homelessness and associated costs, shelter use, health impacts, and long term care needs over the next decade.

The researchers projected significant growth in senior homelessness and estimated that the population of unhoused adults 65 and older will triple from 2017 to 2030 in the three localities included in the study.<sup>5</sup> In addition, they demonstrate the shifting age distribution of adult male shelter users (Figure 3). The proportion of adult male shelter users between 46-54 has shifted from 1 in 8 in 1990 to 1 in 5 in 2000 and then 1 in 3 in 2010. Lastly, their findings point to increased costs for services including shelter, emergency department visits, inpatient care, and nursing homes in each of the three cities.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, Colorado Point in Time Counts began reporting age data in 2023, making it difficult to analyze trends over time. The most recent count shows 2,496 people over 55 experiencing homelessness, accounting for over 13% of the total unhoused population (Figure 4). Of these 2,496 individuals, 1,552 are sheltered and 944 are unsheltered. The majority are between 55-64.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 3**

**Age Distribution of Adult Male Shelter Users in the United States**



Source: Culhane et al. (2013)/ U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census Special Tabulation

**FIGURE 4**

<b>2024 CO PIT Count Data</b>	<b>Sheltered</b>	<b>Unsheltered</b>	<b>Total</b>
55-64	1,153	737	1,890
Over 64	399	207	606
Over 55	1,552	944	2,496
Total- all people experiencing homelessness	13,924	4,791	18,715

## DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS FOR OLDER ADULTS

The crisis of homelessness among older adults is emblematic of a larger demographic shift of aging across the United States population. Census data show that between 1920 and 2020, the US population over the age of 65 grew five times faster than the general population (Figures 5 & 6). This growth was especially pronounced from 2010-2020, when the 65 and over population grew by 15.5 million—the largest numeric gain ever, and by 38.6%—the fastest growth rate since 1880-1890.<sup>8</sup> During this decade, the proportion of people over 65 grew from 13% to 16.8% of the population, which is the same percentage increase as the 50 years between 1960 and 2010.<sup>9</sup> This growth in older Americans has been largely fueled by aging baby boomers, who began turning 65 in 2011.

This phenomenon is mirrored in Colorado. Between 2010 and 2020, the 65-74 age range was the quickest growing demographic in the state and grew by more than 300,000 individuals. Colorado is second among all states for the fastest growth among those over 65, behind only Alaska.<sup>10</sup> Currently, 1 in 7 people in Colorado are over the age of 65.<sup>11</sup> This trend is projected to continue—the number of older adults in Colorado is expected to double, reaching 1.7 million, by 2050.<sup>12</sup> According to the Urban Institute, the number of Americans over 65 will reach 80 million by 2040, with 15 million of those over the age of 85.<sup>13</sup>

Some argue that the growth in homelessness among older adults extends beyond this demographic shift and is tied to specific issues that the Baby Boomer generation experienced. One study described a cohort effect, first advanced by Richard Easterlin, which shows that contemporary homelessness is concentrated among people born between 1955-1965 and is in part caused by economic conditions that impacted this group during formative periods of their lives. Specifically, the researchers argued that difficult economic circumstances created a generation of unemployed and underemployed young adults:

*People from the second half of the post-War baby boom faced crowded labor and housing markets with higher competition for employment, downward pressure on wages, and upward pressure on housing prices. Combined with back-to-back recessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, young adults coming of age in the 1980s faced challenging economic circumstances. (Culhane et al., 2019)*

This cohort now faces a heightened risk of experiencing homelessness as well as premature aging and early death. As the cohort continues to age and the overall population of older adults keeps growing, the challenge of addressing homelessness among this demographic will only intensify, as will the demand for housing that is affordable and can accommodate their needs.



FIGURE 5

## Population 65 Years and Over by Size and Percentage of Total Population: 1920 to 2020

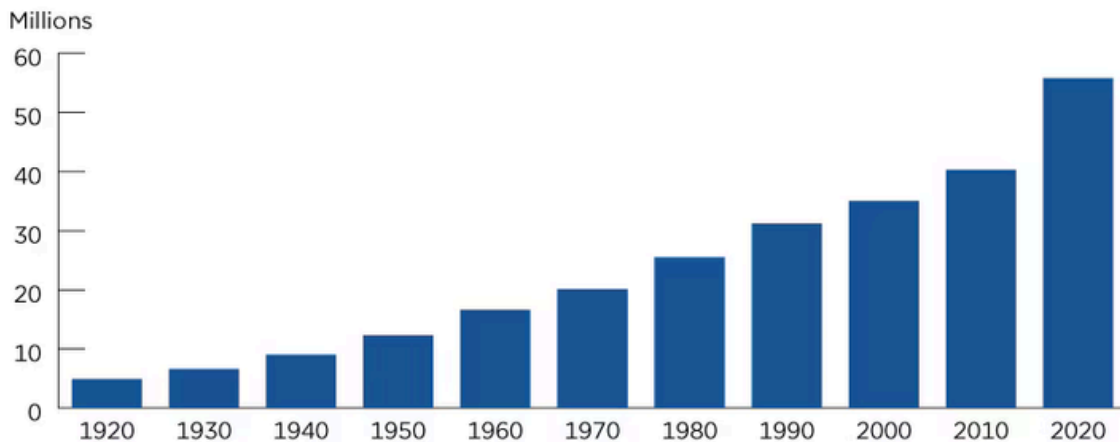
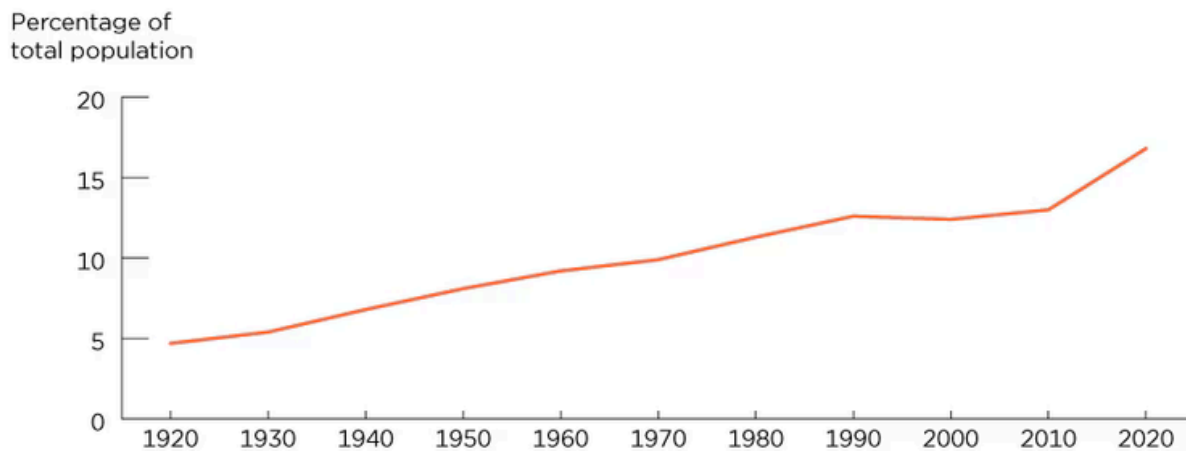


FIGURE 6



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census of Population, 1900 to 2000; 2010 Census Summary File 1, and 2020 Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics File (DHC).

## LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND COST BURDEN

Although older adults face unique challenges that contribute to their experiences of homelessness, the fundamental cause continues to be a dearth of available and affordable housing both generally and specifically targeted for older adults. Across the US, there is no state, metropolitan area, or county where a full time minimum wage earner can afford a two-bedroom unit at fair market rent.<sup>14 15</sup> In 2024, Colorado was the 8th least affordable state in the country, where a minimum wage worker earning \$14.42/hr has to work 85 hours to afford a modest 1 bedroom rental home. While the lack of affordable housing spans across all income brackets and 86% of all Coloradans report that housing is an “extremely serious or very serious problem,” households with low incomes are being

hit the hardest.<sup>16</sup> Unaffordability is compounded by a lack of available homes. For every 100 extremely low-income (ELI) households earning 30% of area median income (AMI) or less, there are only 27 available and affordable units, compared to 101 units per 100 middle-income households.<sup>17 18</sup> 76% of ELI households are spending more than half of their income towards rent, which leaves little for other expenses and puts these households at a greater risk of homelessness.<sup>19</sup>

## INCOME AND INSTABILITY

This lack of affordability can be especially difficult for older adults, who are overrepresented among low and fixed income households. While seniors account for 18% of renter households across the country, they represent 31% of ELI earners.<sup>20</sup> The number of cost burdened older adults has reached an all-time high and the most recent data from

2021 indicate that roughly 11.2 million older adults were cost burdened.<sup>21</sup> Across the US, roughly five million people aged 65 and older are living below the poverty line, and Black, Asian and Hispanic seniors face poverty at higher rates than their white counterparts.<sup>22</sup> Black and Latino older adult renters are also more likely to spend a higher ratio of their income towards housing costs.<sup>23</sup>

**WHILE SENIORS ACCOUNT FOR 18% OF RENTER HOUSEHOLDS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, THEY REPRESENT 31% OF EXTREMELY LOW-INCOME EARNERS.**

In addition, many older adults who are no longer working and collecting regular paychecks live on fixed incomes, relying on savings, pensions, and Social Security to make ends meet. A fixed income means that a household relies on a set amount with little flexibility, which can be especially challenging in times of inflation when expenses rise and income stays the same. Social Security is the primary source of income for most people over the age of 65, with 68 million Americans receiving the benefit each month in 2024. Social Security accounts for about 30% of the total income of people over age 65.<sup>24</sup> Recent data estimates that more than half of adults over 65 rely on Social Security for 50% or more of their income, while nearly a quarter rely on it for at least 90% of their income. While these payments are adjusted annually for cost of living based on the Consumer Price Index, they typically cover only about 70% of essential expenses—such as housing, food, transportation, and health care—leaving approximately 30% of basic needs unmet.<sup>25</sup> In many areas where costs are higher, these benefits alone do not cover housing, even for housing that is naturally affordable or subsidized. In Colorado, the average monthly benefit for social security is \$1,587, while the average fair market rent is \$1,031 for a 1-bedroom and \$1,288 for a 2-bedroom.<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> The combination of poverty, fixed incomes, and high housing costs weigh heavily on older adult households. Households facing cost burden may be more vulnerable to sudden economic shocks, such as medical emergencies, that can quickly escalate to housing instability and even homelessness.

## PATHWAYS TO HOMELESSNESS

### *Adverse Life Experiences*

Among unhoused older adults, there are both those who became homeless for the first time at an older age and those who have experienced repeated or continuous episodes of homelessness since their younger years. About half of unhoused adults over 50 first became homeless in older age.<sup>28</sup> While both groups face similar barriers to housing and challenges of homelessness, their pathways into homelessness may look different. Adults who experience homelessness for the first time before age 50 tend to have had adverse life experiences, such as substance use disorders, mental health challenges, and justice involvement, as well as lower levels of employment early on in life. On the other hand, those who first experience homelessness at age 50 and older typically have experienced a recent financial or health crisis, lost a loved one or otherwise experienced a relationship breakdown with the income-earner, and/or experienced barriers to continued ability to work.<sup>29</sup> Many people who became unhoused at an age older than 50 have struggled with housing insecurity for years before an age-related event like loss of employment or a new or worsening health condition led to homelessness.<sup>30</sup>

### *Physical and Mental Decline*

Mobility difficulties, cognitive decline, changes in functional ability, the loss of a loved one, chronic health conditions, and other issues that come with age can increase the difficulty of staying stably housed. At the same time, experiences of homelessness can accelerate the process of aging due to the negative health effects associated with lack of stable housing. There is a cycle where age increases the likelihood of experiencing homelessness and homelessness exacerbates age-related conditions. For example, all types of disabilities increase with age, and 55% of those over 80 report at least one disability.<sup>31</sup> The onset of a disability can increase one's likelihood of becoming homeless, while at the same time, homelessness worsens the impact of disabling conditions. Unfortunately, there is a lack of support and long term services for when these events happen.

## Incarceration

Older adults are also increasingly being funneled into homelessness through the criminal legal system. As more older adults are being arrested and the incarcerated population ages, older adults account for a growingly large share of the prison population. Between 1991 and 2021, the percentage of the prison population over 55 grew fivefold from 3% to 15%.<sup>32</sup> Serving time in prison can lead to the loss of housing, support networks, employment, and other future opportunities. As a result, those who have served time experience homelessness at a rate seven times greater than the general population.<sup>33</sup> Due to lack of healthcare and other stressors of imprisonment, existing physical, mental, and behavioral health problems often worsen while incarcerated and make reintegration more difficult. Research shows that incarceration itself can actually accelerate aging, and that each year in prison takes two years off an individual's life expectancy. This makes incarceration especially hazardous for older adults.<sup>34</sup> The effects of incarceration are also felt unequally. The rate of incarceration for Black adults is over five times that of white adults, and although Black older adults represent less than half of those experiencing homelessness, they account for 69% of unhoused older adults who have served time. Unhoused Black individuals were most likely of any group to be overrepresented in criminal legal involvement, but overrepresentation also applies to other people of color.

## Veterans



Older veterans, in particular, may be more vulnerable to homelessness due to mental and physical health issues related to service and the negative impacts of war. According to the 2024 Point in Time Count, roughly 33,000 veterans were

experiencing homelessness.<sup>35</sup> While this number remains far too high, the United States has made significant progress, reducing veteran homelessness by 55.6% between 2010 and 2024.<sup>36</sup> This improvement is largely due to the success of the Housing First model through the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program, which provides housing alongside supportive services such as outreach, case management, employment support, health care, transitional housing, and more. Colorado and the United States must build on these successes and scale proven solutions to meet the growing need.

## OUTCOMES

Older adults who experience homelessness face worse health and housing outcomes than their housed counterparts. Managing a preexisting health condition becomes a more arduous task without housing. Taking and storing medication, accessing reliable healthcare, recovering from sickness or injury, and getting adequate sleep are almost impossible for those lacking a stable place to call home. For older adults, housing instability tends to accelerate age-related conditions, and as a result, unhoused people in their 50s often experience geriatric conditions like memory loss, falls, and functional impairments at similar rates to housed people in their 70s.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, higher incidences of chronic conditions and co-occurring health problems among people experiencing homelessness lead to shorter lifespans. Various sources estimate that life expectancy is between 15–30 years shorter for people who are unhoused than the general population.<sup>38</sup> In one study from California, the median age of death for unhoused adults over 50 was 64, and the mortality rate was 3.5 times higher than the general population.<sup>39</sup>

According to one analysis from the National Alliance to End Homelessness, people over 55 are slightly more likely to utilize temporary housing and are more likely to be sheltered than those under 55.<sup>40</sup> Although it was still the most common pathway to exit homelessness, older adults accessed fewer permanent supportive housing placements than those under 55—a trend that increases with age. For example, 22% of those 55–64 received permanent supportive housing interventions, compared to less than two percent of those over 75.<sup>41</sup> The same analysis revealed that as

people age, their housing placements shifted towards rapid rehousing (which is time-limited) and away from permanent supportive housing. Across the board, there is a high demand for housing options that can provide the necessary level of care for residents, especially for older adults experiencing homelessness who may have higher acuity and long term support needs.

These disparities are further exacerbated by race. In addition to experiencing higher rates of homelessness, Black older adults are disproportionately less likely to access both permanent supportive and rapid rehousing solutions compared to all other groups.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Hispanic individuals account for 11% of the older adults experiencing homelessness, but receive less than four percent of permanent housing connections. At the same time, white older adults receive nearly 54% of permanent housing placements, even though they only represent roughly a third of the older unhoused population.<sup>43</sup>

## SOLUTIONS: HOUSING, PUBLIC BENEFITS, AND SUPPORT

To solve homelessness for older adults, we must resolve the mismatch between an aging population and the stock of affordable and available housing. Fundamentally, this requires expanding the supply of affordable housing and ensuring that there are options for households relying on low or fixed incomes. Investments in housing specifically targeted to older adults is critical. In addition, increased funding for maintenance, repair, and improvements are needed to meet the accessibility and mobility needs of older adults, who may have more difficulty navigating their units. Incorporating universal design features into new developments such as stepless entryways, wide doorways, and easy access storage areas, would make it easier for residents to live in their unit as their needs and abilities change. At the same time, we must work to bridge the gap between high housing costs and insufficient incomes by expanding access to financial support and other benefits such as Housing Choice Vouchers, a federal program that provides subsidies to assist low income households in attaining rental housing.

Research indicates that one of the best tools to prevent homelessness among those over 50 would

be by expanding Supplemental Security Income (SSI) which gives monthly payments to disabled children, disabled adults, and individuals aged 65 or older.<sup>44</sup> By increasing the number of older adults who are able to access these programs, as well as the monetary allotments they provide, we can help to lift aging households out of poverty and avoid housing instability and homelessness.

For many who experience homelessness, especially those who first became homeless over the age of 50, increasing affordable housing options, income, and access to public benefits may be enough to help them avoid or exit the cycle of homelessness. Research shows that most experiences of homelessness are brief, often lasting only a few days or weeks and are frequently self-resolved. Only an estimated 30% of people experiencing homelessness exhibit chronic patterns, meaning that an individual has been experiencing homelessness for at least one continuous year or one year broken up into multiple episodes.<sup>45</sup> For the remaining 70% of individuals, the solutions above may be enough to maintain stable housing and prevent homelessness.



For those with higher acuity needs, such as cognitive and physical disabilities, chronic health conditions, substance use disorders, or mental health issues, more intensive interventions and support may be needed. Permanent supportive housing, or housing assistance combined with supportive services, is the best practice for keeping people stably housed while also offering healthcare, treatment, and employment services. Denver's Social Impact Bond program, launched in 2016 provided housing and supportive services to 363 unhoused individuals who were frequent users of the city's emergency services. Participants in the program saw reductions in shelter stays, police interactions, jail time, emergency detox services. In

addition, people used less emergency health care, received more office-based care, had better access to prescription medications, and overall better access to preventative care.<sup>46</sup> This approach has been effective in successfully housing tens of thousands of veterans over the last decade, and if scaled, could drive further reductions in homelessness for older adults.

It is crucial that programs and services be tailored to the needs of individuals seeking assistance. While traditional case management, housing assistance, and healthcare services may be sufficient for many, it is important to recognize that homelessness and housing resources are sometimes not able to meet the complex needs of older adults. Aging adults may face barriers in screening, outreach, and identification of housing instability due to fears of losing independence, difficulty understanding eligibility requirements, lack of transportation, and lacking necessary documents. Shelters may be especially difficult to access for seniors and housing solutions do not always provide the level of care that unhoused aging adults require.

In certain cases, long term services and supports (LTSS) may be needed to assist with daily living activities such as eating, bathing, and dressing. More than six million people in the US use long-term services and supports in home community

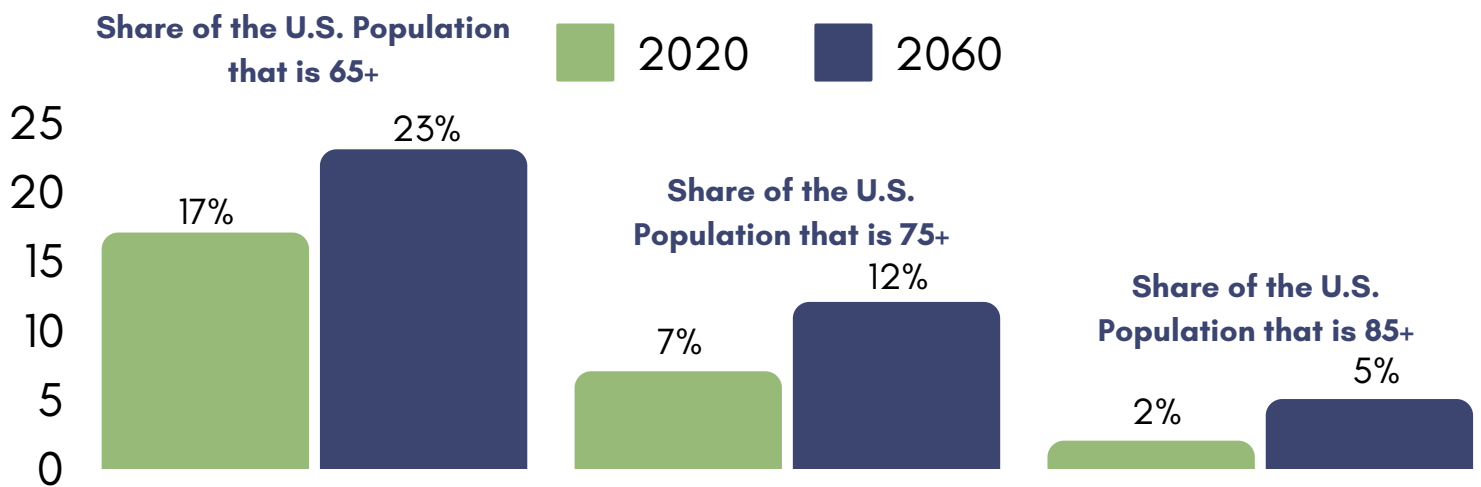
settings, and an additional two million access them in institutional settings. Nursing facility care, adult daycare programs, home health aide services, transportation, and supported employment may all be included in LTSS and can be provided over weeks, months, or years depending on level of need.<sup>47</sup> These programs are expensive and generally not covered by Medicare, so most people pay for them directly or have services covered by Medicaid, which may not be available in all states. In addition, these programs can be difficult to access and subject to workforce shortages. Approximately 171,000 seniors were on a waiting or interest list for Medicaid home and community based services in 2023, and the number of workers in the LTSS sector dropped 4% during the pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, those with the lowest incomes are most likely to require assistance, yet have the fewest resources to cover the costs. As the population continues to age, so too will the demand for long term services and supports that are available and affordable (Figure 7).

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness highlights several innovative strategies that states have implemented to meet the service needs of this population.<sup>49</sup> The Foundation for Senior Living in Arizona links affordable housing to community health workers who assist with healthcare navigation, health monitoring, food access, transportation assistance and social programming to address social determinants of health. They also

**FIGURE 7**

## An Aging Population Will Need More Long-Term Services and Supports

Share of the U.S. population projected to be various ages in 2020 compared with 2060



Source: KFF Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's Projected 5-year Age Group and Sex Composition: Main Projections Series for the United States, 2017-2060



highlight California's Home Safe program, which seeks to prevent homelessness through financial assistance, case management, home improvement, and landlord engagement. Through this program, adult protective services agencies investigate cases of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation, which can often result in homelessness. Colorado should implement similar programs that take a comprehensive, holistic approach to eradicating senior homelessness.

In 2024, the Colorado General Assembly passed several pieces of legislation that will support older adults with housing and economic security. HB24-1052 will provide relief to older adults by reinstating a refundable income tax credit for Coloradans over the age of 65 with incomes under \$75,000. HB24-1142 also lowered the age for people receiving social security benefits to reduce their taxable income from 64 to 55, allowing more people to access tax relief. In addition, HB24-1268 converted the underused property tax, heat and rent rebate for people with disabilities into a refundable income tax credit in hopes of increasing utilization and making it easier to claim.

Congress should work to advance legislation that increases the supply of housing that is affordable and accessible to older adults living on lower and fixed incomes. This includes the Affordable Housing Credit Improvement Act, which would expand and reform the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) to spur development of affordable rental housing. In a similar vein, the Visitable Inclusive Tax credits for Accessible Living or VITAL Act also increases LIHTC allocations for projects that specifically serve households with older and disabled individuals. These strategies, along with expansions to the Housing Choice Voucher program, federal funding for homelessness resolution, and better long term and supportive services for seniors would go a long way in mitigating housing instability and homelessness for older adults.

## CONCLUSION

The growing issue of homelessness among older adults is a pressing challenge that demands immediate attention and policy solutions.

As the population ages and housing costs continue to rise, many older adults are increasingly at risk of losing stable housing and entering the cycle of homelessness. For far too many, experiences of homelessness in later years translates directly to negative health outcomes, early onset of age-related conditions, and untimely death. Policymakers should take targeted steps to expand the stock of affordable and accessible housing, improve healthcare access, and invest in tailored programs that meet the needs of unhoused older adults.

The Coalition will continue to take action to reverse these alarming trends and advance comprehensive solutions that provide support, security, and dignity for older adults.



